

Meeting with Krystyna Senchenko, feminist and LGBTQIA+ rights activist in Ukraine

English transcript

Juliette

So we can start. Thank you so much Krystyna to have accepted this interview for Gouinement Lundi. We are very thrilled to have you and to hear from you and from what's happening in Ukraine and your commitments there.

So, first of all, how are you?

Krystyna

Yeah, good morning, Juliette. Thank you so much for inviting me. It is a big honor to be a guest on your podcast, so thank you very much. I'm doing okay. So we've got sirens during the night, and I didn't get a good night's sleep, but that's the usual thing.

So, yeah, having my coffee, trying to wake up.

Juliette

Okay, so can you introduce yourself to our listeners? Who are you? What's your name? And Can I ask you about your commitment to the rights for women and LGBTQ people in Ukraine?

Krystyna

Sure. So, my name is Krystyna Senchenko, and I'm 25 years old, Ukrainian feminist. I live in Lviv and I'm working for Women's March as a project manager. And I also work in an It company, which was my job and used to be my only job before the invasion.

So I'm really lucky with my location, since it is located in the west of Ukraine, and we can say that it is a relatively safe area.

So as soon as I was introduced to the concept of feminism during my student years, I started incorporating its values to my daily activities.

By nature, I am an educator, so I found it valuable to transfer this knowledge forward. And I was the director of this nonformal educational youth organization. So we had access to hundreds of teenagers around the country. We traveled to many regions, and we did many workshops on human rights, feminism and non-hate speech and so on.

Then my friends and I started going to Prides and Women Marches to support the equal rights for LGBTQIA + people and women in Ukraine. These events are not the safest ones, but they are really important to highlight the visibility of these groups. So then I realized that I needed to join the corporate world, and I got a chance to drive this really wonderful project called Diversity and Inclusion, in one of the biggest It companies and with my wonderful team.

So after the invasion, I joined Women's March inside as a volunteer, and I keep up with the job there right now. Sometimes I take parts in different conferences and write some articles trying to make feminism accessible and eatable to the Ukrainian population. So I have this beautiful sense of belonging at Women's March at this moment, because what we do, we provide the basic goods and basic humanitarian aid to women who are located close to the frontline and who are the internally displaced people. We are working in ten regions which are closer to the Russian Federation, and we are trying to cover the needs of the marginalized populations.

So, like, women who have lost their jobs, women with disabilities, women of the third age, young girls, single moms and also LGBT people because we realize that they are not a part of the governmental focuses right now. So we are trying to support LGBTQIA+ population with basic hygiene items, medicines and hormones.

Juliette

That's amazing what you are saying, that you are really like filling a gap that the government isn't doing.

So how big is your organization? How many people are involved to do this job?

Krystyna

Yeah, so basically, before the invasion, Insight and Parental Organization for Women's March, it had the representation in eleven regions and there were many community centers for the LGBT people to come and spend some time during the events and become a part of the local community.

Right now, we only have a few of those left due to the military actions happening in Ukraine. At this moment, we have three shelters. Two are in Lieve, one is in Tchernivtsi. They are for women and LGBT people. We also have two humanitarian hubs and we have some coordinators and volunteers working there. Overall, it's nearly 40 people, but people come and go because it is the worst. We cannot predict who is going to be available tomorrow or the day after.

So, yeah, we have a very flexible team, but all of us are united with the same values and we stand for the same things.

Juliette

That's very impressive. That's very brave. I mean, it's so close and so far at the same time from us and friends. Thank you so much for this testimony.

You mentioned earlier that in Ukraine, LGBTQ people weren't always safe. So how would you describe the situation before the invasion, say, for people to be a queer in Ukraine? How does the Russian attack impact situation? How are you fears towards this attack? We know Russia is a dictatorship, very hard on LGBTQ rights and women's rights. How do you handle all of this? *

So, first of all, what was the situation before and how do you feel now with this?

Krystyna

Thank you for this question. Ukraine is on its way to becoming inclusive regarding LGBTQ+ community. People are overall tolerant, with some exceptions, of course, there are many LGBTQIA+ Rights Defenders organizations, for example, Insight, the organization that I have mentioned earlier, and there are many allies and allies organization. The pop culture is getting there with the help of new generations of Ukrainians who are more open minded and brave. LGBTQIA+ Prides are held regularly, but this year we had to travel to Warsaw to join the Pride organized by Warsaw Pride for the safety reasons. It is wonderful seeing thousands of people demonstrating their solidarity.

However, the government should pay more attention to the rights of LGBTQIA+ people because they're not still allowed to get married, to adopt children, to claim inheritance from their partners after their death, to be present in the intense care unit in case their partner is unconscious, and respectively make any kind of decisions regarding their health. Some bank transactions are available

only to the married couples and you can get some perks from the bank only if you are married. And some military mobilization laws are the same.

So we need support from the government regarding that. It is important to remember that Ukraine has contrasting values with Russia, including human rights and LGBTQIA+ rights.

As you have mentioned before and after the invasion, we saw all of the war crimes and how Russia is stretching their own people, soldiers and their families, captivated Ukrainian civilians and military people. This misanthropic paradigm is something that Ukraine doesn't stand for and doesn't want to own despite the law.

So LGBTQIA+ people are visible. They can have any kind of profession, including the military post. So right now, many queer people are the soldiers. They're snipers, they join the Marine, they are paramedics, and they're fighting for the territorial defense. And in the regular army, they get the money for ammunition, they organize shelters for the internally displaced people. And some people come out after seeing LGBTQIA+ people within their little communities in the front. And this is a powerful move because the front line is perceived as the apex center of masculinity and conservative attitude to different populations. So I think that we're on our way. I'm not sure that you know, but just lost.

Regarding same sex marriage, it was addressed to our President. It gathered 25,000 votes in a really short period of time. And since passing the law about same sex marriage, it demands changing our Constitution. It is impossible to do during the war because it's prohibited to change the Constitution during the war. But the government is working out some ways of the civilian partnerships. And of course, civilian partnership is not something that LGBTQ+ people will be totally satisfied with. But I see it as the first step because it is a very long journey from the conservative community to the community that respects all of the people and treats them equally. It gives them the same opportunities regarding legislature as well. So Ukraine is on its way.

Juliette

Okay, that's good to hear. So we met in Paris, where you received a price from the city of Paris. Can you tell us a bit about this price and how you felt welcomed in Paris? And furthermore, my question was about the support from the international community? Is it there? Is it sufficient or not?

Krystyna

Yeah. Thank you so much. Well, first of all, Paris, of course. It was my first time in the city of Paris, and it was absolutely fantastic. I didn't have many expectations, to be honest, because leaving the country during the war, if something happens, I wouldn't be there. So I was there under the pressure of all of the news and sirens, which kept going on my phone because I didn't want to disconnect from the news. But when I woke up my first morning in Paris, I just realized that I have to live these two days, like in the movies. So all the people whom I met in the municipality building, they were really great and supportive, and I was really delighted to meet all of the ELC members who helped Insight and Women's March to organize the evacuation during February and March, I hug them and say a big thank you.

So my speech in the municipality was regarding the international support and the importance of the small scale organizations like ELC and their role in the support of women and LGBTQ+ population right now.

So the humanitarian giants, as I call them, the UN, the Red Cross and so on, they're really bureaucratic, and they are trying to apply the same frameworks that they used to have in other military conflicts. So they're quite far away from the context in Ukraine. And for example, there is this beautiful situation that happened to us. So Olena Shevchenko, who is the director of Insight and Women's March, and who was actually awarded with the price that I had an honor to receive and pass it to her, she requested some blankets from the big organization, let's say in March, because the situation on the border, it was super tense. There were people standing there, most of them were women. They were standing there with their kids for more than 24/48 hours. So they were trying to flee the war. sirens, freezing temperatures. So she requested the blankets and they came in June.

Yeah. And this is like one of the examples of their timely humanitarian aid being delivered. So they expect us to provide help to those populations whom they consider to be most vulnerable, even though knowing the specificities of our job at Women's March and Insight.

So at some point, it is way easier to decline their gentle proposal, then to accept it. At the same time, when we come across these organizations like ELC, we realize that it is possible to make effective partnerships and it is possible to find people who will hear our needs and who will provide something, even though the volumes might not be considerable.

So we do appreciate any kind of contribution and we do appreciate our small but really valuable friendships with European and American organizations. And we're looking forward to keeping our cooperation in the nearest future.

First reason, because the work will continue and we have no forecast when it will end. And second one, just because they're awesome. And we would really like to get in touch with those people and work on similar projects regarding women's and LGBTQ+ rights here in Ukraine and there in Europe.

So, yeah, Paris was awesome. I saw the old buildings, the Luxembourg Palace and the gardens. And I saw the Louvre but I didn't go inside and I saw Eiffel Tower and it was like in the movies. And I really enjoyed this experience. And my favorite coffee place was the Shakespearean Co. And my new friend took me there. We spent some time there just talking and watching people running on the streets. Everyone was so calm and they looked like they enjoyed life. And this is why I was really delighted to have these two, three days just to remind myself how normal life will look like after the Ukrainian victory in this war. Get that moving.

Juliette

Thank you. So thank you for all this very detailed and smart and incredible responses. So I have just one last question that is very simple. You can answer it either way. Do you have a message you wanted to send to the people who will listen to this interview? Or what are your wishes for the future? You can enter either of them or both of them just to close up this interview with something from you.

Krystyna

Yes, thank you for this question. So when a city gets bombed, many international partnerships partners, they are promising to rebuild our cities, but not that many people are talking about rebuilding our lives. So we are now Ukrainians are in the process of getting one of the most significant collective trauma and it will take years to integrate it.

So we need to make Ukraine a comfortable and inclusive place for all kinds of populations living here. It includes legislature and urban planning and values and education. And we are so looking forward to getting back to peaceful life and to all of the aspects of the victory.

So I just know some things about Ukraine, and I just want Europeans to remember those as well. We are stronger than we are. And, yes, the news from the front line are terrifying, and the violation of human rights is terrorizing. But we will not put ourselves on pause because we're running a marathon. And we continue to do things. We continue to act. So when people are on pause, when they are scared, it leads to defeat and action leads to victory. And we are a brave nation, and 40million hearts are beating in the same rhythm. We know the price of freedom. We are on our own land. We have strength and resources to overcome the war because we really love our life, and we know what we're fighting for.

So if you stand for the values that Ukraine stands for, you are welcome to support us, because currently, we're the shield for European democracy. And I'm sure that everyone knows what the price is when your shield gets away from you.

So, yeah, I guess this is it.

Juliette

Okay. Thank you so much, Krystyna.

Krystyna

Thank you bye !

Juliette

Bye!